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ABSTRACT

Ownership of personal electronic devices (such as smart phones and tablets) with ready-access to the internet—whether institutionally mandated or otherwise—has become nearly ubiquitous among students in higher educational settings in Japan. This paper describes an investigation into the feasibility of producing digital resources for use by learners in and out of class in a Japanese university EFL environment. Consideration of existing technological infrastructure along with the affordances of several major software packages will be examined and recommendations for further development will be given.

INTRODUCTION

Given that a majority of university students in Japan now have in their hands—literally—devices which allow for instant access to the internet and cloud services, more personalized interaction with content, and the ability to work at one's convenience and chosen location (Castellano, 2012; Paterson, 2013), institutions face the challenge of developing materials that capitalize on this technology to complement course instruction. This paper considers the practicality and potential benefits of such an undertaking at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Chiba, Japan, where freshmen have been required to purchase iPads for use in coursework since April of 2014. While research into the viability of porting (select) existing curriculum to the iBooks Author format is ongoing, further exploration of how to make the most of this new digital ecology should embrace a broad scope of applications for novel, compelling, and expedient pedagogical intervention.

BACKGROUND

In a June 2013 lecture at KUIS, Rod Ellis discussed the potential advantages of electronic corrective feedback for revision of student writing vis-à-vis John Milton's description (2006) of a system where students are directed to online resources targeting commonly-occurring error types. The central idea is that exposure to various language samples (in a corpus database, for instance) better positions authors to self-correct, allowing them to decide for themselves whether or not—and *how*—to make changes in their writing. Dr. Ellis even went so far as to suggest the creation of a similar corrective feedback mechanism by the English Language Institute (ELI),[1] noting that through its implementation, "potentially, students become much more autonomous in being able to identify and self-correct their errors" (2013).

In her work on treatment of error in L2 writing, Dana Ferris (2011) mentions in-class grammar "mini-lessons" as a potential intervention strategy, citing several studies which found such targeted instruction to be effective in the revision of student writing (Bitchener & Knock, 2008; Ferris, 1995; Frantzen & Rissel, 1987; Lalande, 1982; Sheen, 2007). The initial concept of this project was to develop a homegrown application that marries the focused grammar mini-lessons Ferris describes with Milton's instant access to electronic resources. It was envisioned that student writers would revise written work on their tablets within an app providing immediate access to tailored instructional materials that aid in the correction of individualized error types.[2] As for the software to be used in the creation

[1] The English Language Institute (ELI) is an integral part of Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS). The ELI was founded in 1989 with 4 full-time members. Since that time it has grown to its current complement of over 60 teachers who have been recruited from all around the world. Teachers develop and teach a variety of English proficiency courses (Kanda University of International Studies, 2015).

[2] Participial adjectives (surprised/surprising, for example) were chosen as the target grammar point, having been identified by the author in an earlier study as a commonly-occurring error in the L2 writing of KUIS sophomore students (Faulhaber, 2014).

of the aforementioned app, LiveCode was selected after attendance at a workshop by Robert Cvitkovic (2013) convinced the author that its cross-platform and usage-tracking capabilities could provide valuable insights into how student learners utilize electronic resources in the service of writing revision. An incidental benefit would be justification for mandating tablet use in classrooms, thus opening the door to the creation of a university-wide library of self-access digital resources.

METHODOLOGY

In order to evaluate prospective software packages identified as being suitable to the objectives of this project, a simple activity comprising multiple pages, hyperlinks, and user-selectable input was devised for testing purposes. The activity was piloted by the author with an eye towards appraising degree of development-difficulty, tracking of learner-generated events, in-use performance ("buggy-ness"), and cross-platform/device compatibility.

FINDINGS

After completing an introductory course on building simple applications with LiveCode, the author came to the realization that getting past the learning curve—while rather straightforward compared to other "pure" programming languages—is not something most teachers could reasonably be expected to negotiate. It was also around this time that LiveCode introduced a new version of the software along with a separate development language (2015); rather than invest more time in pursuit of taming a less-than-ideal solution given the project's scope and user base, the decision was made to trial the offerings of several other major players in the field.

The second application assessed was Adobe's venerable Captivate (version 9.0), a

mature product specializing in software simulations and soft-skills online training. The Captivate development environment was felt to be, in the author's personal opinion, suffering from a buildup of cruft due to the layering on of multiple revisions carried out over the years, leading to an inconsistent experience bouncing back and forth between the latest interface and deeper, core functionalities. While long-time users would no doubt feel comfortable working in upgraded versions of those to which they've already become accustomed, a newbie with no legacy investment in the platform may fare better starting out with tools designed from the ground up to publish in HTML 5 (which is rapidly becoming the de facto standard for displaying content on the web). Captivate, by contrast, has one foot still firmly entrenched in the Flash camp. Though the activity created by the author with Captivate 9 *was* exported using HTML 5, it nonetheless consistently produced error messages during trials in browsers on both a 2012 MacBook Pro and an iPad 3.

In search of an alternative to Captivate—preferably one based entirely on the HTML 5 standard, thus eschewing stopgap workarounds for soon-to-be obsolete formats and standards for packaging and displaying interactive content—a third tool was given a try: Tumult's Hype 3. In early tests, the aforementioned activity was successfully recreated without any error messages whatsoever. It was also easier to produce a clean, consistent, and professional design (though that may be the result of the similarity between Hype's development environment and that of Keynote, which the author is already comfortable using). In its current incarnation, Hype does not implement tracking features (critical for doing research on student interaction with any e-learning activity) with the same ease as Captivate, but it is possible to employ external agents—such as Google Analytics—to organize and report this information.

Another feature that makes Hype an attractive option is the fact that it creates widgets for use in iBooks Author and exports projects as browser-based content. This latter point

is of key interest as many e-learning content creation platforms are designed to deploy primarily through learning management systems (LMSs). At the time of this writing, the LMS in use at KUIS is Moodle. A recent survey of ELI instructors, however, found that only 2 of 39 respondents reported using Moodle in their classes (Lloyd-Williams, 2015). 24 respondents chose "I don't like using it" while more telling responses in the open comments section point to incompatibility issues with Moodle not being "iPad friendly" (see appendix for full survey). The fact that e-learning activities created in Hype are browser based and directly accessed from the web/cloud frees them of any LMS intermediation and limitations.

DISCUSSION

The widespread use of smartphones and tablets among university students in Japan necessitates that institutions examine how best to take advantage of the learning opportunities presented by these devices—both in and out of the classroom. While neither of the e-learning content creation tools investigated here are appropriate for tech novices, there is a clear divide in terms of "approachability" and the user-experience. (The ideal solution would be to have a dedicated instructional design team in-house to work directly with instructors in the creation, testing, and ongoing development of digital materials and resources.) The sun appears to be setting on the relationship with Moodle at KUIS but the terrain of the future technological landscape has not yet been fully surveyed. For the time being, piloting of prototype mini-lessons such as the one developed by the author should continue with student testing and input. Hype 3 may well prove to be the right tool for the job—at least in these initial stages—as its independence from LMS integration and legacy formats should prove agile in a rapid cycle of develop, deploy, test, and revise.

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APPENDIX—Moodle survey

Name (optional): _____

1. Do you use Moodle for your classes at KUIS?

   ○ Yes, I do

   ○ No, I do not

2. If you answered "Yes, I do", what do you use it for?

   ☐ Content delivery

   ☐ Testing

   ☐ Data/materials storage

   ☐ Other: _____

3. If you answered "No, I do not", why not?

   ☐ I don't know how to use it

   ☐ I don't like using it

   ☐ I don't need it

   ☐ Other: _____

4. What other apps, software, or platforms do you normally use for content delivery?

   ☐ Edmodo

   ☐ Attachments to email

   ☐ STN-NT server

   ☐ Other: _____

5. Is there anything else you would like to mention regarding online course delivery in the ELI?

   Submit